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ABSTRACT

Key research in the literature on the relationship between parent participation and achievement is discussed, participation being defined in terms of activities both within and outside of the school. The research resists generalization because of the range of potential parent activities and the uncertainty about what they convey, but yields the following points: (1) it is difficult to isolate the influence of parent participation on achievement from the effects of social class and race, but parent participation appears to be associated with the enhanced achievement of low income students; (2) parental decision making is not particularly related to achievement and parent-school contacts are only marginally effective; however, a wide range of activities and programs do appear to have some effect on the character of the school and achievement, especially if they are oriented to the community's needs; (3) programs fostering parent involvement in at-home teaching improve achievement, particularly for low-income elementary school children, but more elaborate parental programs and parent education are needed; (4) the effective schools movement has played down parent participation, in the belief that it will weaken the school's responsibility for educating all children; and (5) the recent shift from Federal to an increasing State responsibility for education, together with renewed interest in parental choice, may have increased the potential for parents to participate in determining education in their communities. (RDN)

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Parent Participation and the Achievement of Disadvantaged Students

Since the 1960s, educators have sought to increase parent participation in schools, for both political and educational reasons. At the same time, the precise role parents should play has been controversial and the benefits of parent involvement unclear. There has been a great deal of speculation, particularly concerning low income and minority parent participation: it is sometimes held that parents of disadvantaged students don't participate enough, or that their participation disrupts the school's agenda, or, conversely, that their involvement is the essential key to their children's achievement. On the other hand, in recent years, some educators have tended to avoid altogether the issue of participation of low income minority parents, since it can easily distract a school from acknowledging its own responsibility to educate students.

The literature on parent participation has become voluminous, but only a small body provides specific research information about the effectiveness of parents in one or more of the wide variety of roles they may play in public schools and in the education of their children.

What is Parent Participation?

The participation of parents in their children's education includes activities both within and outside of the school. In school, their roles vary from that of the traditional providing juice and cookes and helping out on field trips, to acting as tutors or aides in the classroom, or participating in PTAs, school boards, and other decision-making bodies. Outside the school parental roles vary from signing report cards and reading notes from the teacher, to helping with homework and initiating other educational activities. A recent review of the research on parent participation divides these roles analytically into three types: parents acting as advocates (lobbyists or watchdogs), parents in decision-making roles, and parents in roles of co-producing schooling (Zerchykov, 1984). Somewhat differently, a survey of 135 Midwestern elementary schools allowed for seven types of parent involvement: attendance at meetings and school functions, participation in fundraising, use of facilities, involvement in discussion sessions, parent contacts with school staff, procedural decision-making, and curricular decision-making (Wagenaar, 1977). Yet again, a study of parental involvement in 256 second-and third-grade classrooms in California isolated five areas for research: school-home communications (including conferences, written reports, and parent education sessions), parents' awareness of school operations, parents' perception of their influence, parents' participation (including volunteer hours, parent visits and attendance at PTA meetings), and parent-teacher relations—as judged by both parties (Herman and Yeh, 1983).

The great variety of activities in which parents can and do participate, as well as the uncertainty about what exactly is conveyed by even such a simple task as a parent signing a homework sheet, makes the research difficult to generalize upon. Moreover, while single site studies may obstensibly be clear about the type of participation being investigated, research reviews tend either to lump together the entire phenomenon or to organize the varieties of participation in incomparable ways.

Can the Influence of Parent Participation on Achievement Be Isolated From the Effects of Social Class and Race?

Understanding the relationship between parent participation and student achievement is made more difficult because of the effect of social class on both. Schools serving high socioeconomic familes tend to have both high parent participation and high student achievement, while the reverse is true for schools serving low socioeconomic families. Thus findings that do not control for class may well confound the effects of parental background with that of parent participation on achievement.

However, several studies can be looked at to understand the effects of parent participation in schools serving low SES and/or minority students. One study (California, 1977) indicates that when low socioeconomic status schools with high and low achievement are compared, principals report the community as being more supportive in the high than in the low achieving schools. Moreover, high achieving schools in low socioeconomic areas have more adult volunteers than do the low achieving schools.

A study of a city-wide reading improvement project for low-income minority 6th grade students found that background factors such as socioeconomic status, health, ethnicity, attendance, and reading scores in earlier grades accounted for most of the variation in improvement (Armor and others, 1976). However, community involvement variables also played an important role, particularly in the black community. The researchers arranged the participating schools on a continuum of school-neighborhood cooperation, from traditional attempts at outreach (asking parents to become passively and tangentially involved), to making provisions for active and sustained parent involvement, to creating a feeling of community integration by providing school space for neighborhood use in addition to allowing parents to plan and monitor school activities. "In black neighborhoods, the more vigorous were the school's efforts to involve parents and community in decisionmaking, the better did the 6th grade students fare in reading attainment" (p.vi). In the Mexican American neighborhoods, by contrast, no such relationship existed, although "the school that was most effective in that subsample, if not in producing reading gains, then in holding back losses, was also the school with the highest level of school/community integration and awareness among monolingual Spanish-speaking parents" (p.48). The researchers speculate that the differences in the two types of communities was caused by two factors: that language created barriers to communication in the Hispanic communities, and that outreach programs in these communities were more directed to community than to educational needs, whereas in the black community outreach programs were more likely to include educational components.

It would appear, then, that efforts to reach out do involve parents are associated with the enhanced achievement of low income students.

Is One Type of Parental Involvement in the Schools Most Conducive to Student Achievement in the Elementary Grades?

Several studies that analyze a range of parental involvement activities may be used to shed light on those activities which are more or less useful to student achievement.

To investigate the impact of citizen and parent involvement on achievement, Wagenaar (1977) surveyed 135 Midwestern elementary principals about the level and type of parent and community participation in their schools. Controlling for SES in order to eliminate the class bias in both student achievement and levels of participation, Wagenaar found that schools with higher achievement and levels of participation, Wagenaar found that schools with higher achievement were more open to parent and community involvement, while more "closed" schools had lower achievement levels and community support. However, not all types of involvement made a difference. Community support and fundraising, attendance at school meetings, and the number of school functions involving the community were all highly correlated with achievement. Less so were community group use of school facilities and level and number of parent-school contacts. Finally, citizen participation in policy decisionmaking was not related to achievement.

Starting with a sample of 19 elementary schools which had shown a dramatic improvement in their Michigan Educational Assessment Program test scores, Clancy (1982) attempted to tease out those community as well as educational factors responsible for the student acievement. Though the schools varied in size, wealth, kinds of community, pupil-teacher ratios, and even expenditure-per-pupil, the socioeconomic background of their sending parents tended to be lower than average. A major finding of the study was that "improving" schools tended to have programs for reaching and communicating with parents that were appropriate to the nature of the community. These included community education programs, such as arts and crafts classes and recreational activities, through which parents could become familiar with the school staff and the school's objectives. In addition, these community education programs had achieved overall community support by serving nonpublic school parents, such as senior citizens, nonparents and parents of children in private schools.

Using data collected in two second-grade and two third-grade classrooms in each of 256 schools during an evaluation of California's Early Childhood Education program, and controlling for socioeconomic status and prior achievement, Herman and Yeh (1983) found that parent participation was strongly related to student achievement. Moreover, through a path analysis, parent participation was found to relate positively to both parents' perceptions of their influence on school decision-making and the quality of parent-teacher relations, as judged by both parties—though neither of these subjective factors directly influenced students' achievement. Finally, contrary to expectations, the amount of home-school communication—perhaps, as the

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authors suggest, because it tended to be one-way—was related to achievement only indirectly, as it influenced parent participation.

It appears that parental decision-making, whether in policy or curriculum, is not particularly related to student achievement. It may be that even in those schools where parents as a group exercise a strong decision-making role, only very few individually do so. Parent-school contacts also appear only marginally effective, except perhaps to prompt other forms of participation. On the other hand, a wide ranging group of activities and programs do appear to have some effect on the character of the school and on student achievement, particularly if they are oriented to the needs of the surrounding community.

Do Parents Who Participate in At-Home Learning Activities Enhance the Achievement of Their Elementary School Children?

By comparison with the research on parent participation in the schools, studies of parent involvement in at-home teaching are clean-cut as well as, often experimental. Research on programs that foster parent involvement in at-home teaching tends to show that such programs are effective in improving intellectual functioning and achievement, particularly for low-income elementary school children (few studies go beyond the intermediate grades), and that their effects are sustained for at least one year, and in some cases for as long as three to five years after the end of the program (Becker, 1984; Cotton, 1982).

In a review of 24 behavior modification studies using at-home parental reinforcement for in-school academic and behavior change activities, Barth (1979) found that what parents do at home, as well as what schools do to promote and facilitate home learning, make a difference in student achievement. At-home parental reinforcement was initiated by school contacts ranging from daily or weekly notes to more elaborate plans and programs. According to Barth, almost any system of regular contact was effective, and there was no need for elaborate parent education programs.

Most of the literature on academic learning through at-home activities, however, points to the need for more elaborate parental programs as well as parent education. Gillum (1977) compared the effects of two parent involvement strategies on the standardized reading test scores of 2nd and 6th grade students. One type of parent involvement consisted mereiy of filling out questionnaires and attending large group meetings; the other was a parental intervention strategy that included inservice training for teachers and administrators in working with parents; training for 40 parent leaders, who then conducted parent education sessions for their peers; and vouchers to both schools and parents, redeemable for educational materials, based on the level of parental involvement, and stipends to parents for attending meetings. Where parental involvement was largely symbolic, student performance was lower than "where parents participated in deciding what was taught and had responsibility for working with children" (p.16).

Because not all parents know how to get involved in school-related activities, a recent study by Epstein (1984) focused on the effects of teachers' practices in involving parents in home-learning activities. Reading and mathematics scores of 293 third and fifth grade Baltimore studens were compared in the fall and following spring. Students whose teachers were leaders in the use of parent involvement made greater gains in reading (but not in math) than did other students whose teachers were not recognized for their parent involvement practices. In fact, teachers were able to help lesser and better educated parents more nearly resemble each other in the assistance they gave their children. According to the author, "two types of parents influence positive growth in reading achievement—parents who *are expected to help* their children (those with more education) and parents who *are helped to help* their children (those whose children's teachers involve them in learning activities and increase their knowledge about the school program)" (p.7). Since even better educated parents were not able to help their children improve in mathematics, the author suggests that "teachers may need to give more attention to helping parents of older children learn *how to help* their children in math at home"(p.13).

Becker and Epstein (1982) offer a number of techniques for helping to involve parents in their children's school learning:

- Activities emphasizing reading, such as asking parents to read at home to their children, or to listen tho them read.
- Learning through discussion, such as asking parents to watch and then discuss a special television program with their children.
- Informal learning activities at home, such as sending home ideas for family games or activities related to schoolwork.
- Contracts between teachers and parents, such as formal agreements for parents to supervise and assist children with homework.
- Developing teaching and evaluation skills in parents, such as explaining techniques for teaching or for making learning materials.

Does the Effective Schooling Research Say Anything About Parental Involvement?

In an attempt to make schools responsible for the education of *all* children, the effective schools movement has, for the most, avoided the issue of parent participation. Instead, school effectiveness educators and researchers have looked only for those actions capable of being controlled within the school building. The five well-known correlates of effective schooling—strong instructional leadership, an institutional focus on basic skills, an orderly climate with the focus on learning, high expectations for student achievement, and frequent monitoring of student progress—are clearly school-bound, and therefore largely under the control of school personnel. Although many effective schooling educators and researchers informally believe that active parents and interested citizens groups are, in fact, important to stimulating the staff enthusiasm, educational accountability, and strong school spirit characteristic of middle-class schools, most fear that any emphasis on the role of parents in increasing student achievement will defer the responsibility for education that must be placed on the school.

Yet important questions remain that might be answered by a broader view of effective schooling: Is parent participation a variable that intersects with instructional leadership, a focus on basic skills, or other variables isolated by the school effectiveness research? Or, on the other hand, does parent participation function as a factor in increasing student achievement independent of—or only weekly related to—all or most of the effective schooling factors?

Will the Changing Power Relations in Public Education Open New Roles For Parent Participation.

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Will the Changing Power Relations in Public Education Open New Roles For Parent Participation?

The recent decline of the Federal role in education has precipitated a conspicuous growth in the role of the States. Though national reform commissions have created a stir to improve schooling, much of the concrete response has, in fact, been by state legislatures and boards of education.

Less conspicuous than the growing power of the states in education is the effect of this changing situation on the role of parents and other local groups. Although PTA membership was on the decline for two decades, since 1983, it has begun to rise slightly each year. Moreover, a wide range of citizens' groups are active in major cities—often allying themselves with business, university, and other interested groups. Finally, the recent discussions of educational vouchers have given the issue of parental choice and involvement new seriousness. Given these shifts and the potentially larger role for parents in determining education in their communities, we need a better understanding of the nature of parent participation in schooling and the direct and indirect effects on student achievement.

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